Teaching French: Parisian Standard or Francophone Diversity?

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Abstract

- In a rapidly changing Francophone world shaped by globalization, mobility, and shifting linguistic identities, the traditional standard of French—historically aligned with Parisian usage—is increasingly being challenged. This talk traces the ideological, political, and pedagogical foundations of the so-called 'standard norm' and shows how it became the sole reference at the expense of Francophone diversity. From a critical sociolinguistic perspective, it presents French as a pluricentric language and outlines principles of an inclusive pedagogy that legitimates diverse usages, strengthens teacher training in variation, and adapts curricular resources.

Keywords

- Plural Francophonie;
- Language standardization;
- French language teaching;
- Sociolinguistic variation;
- Linguistic discrimination

1. Introduction

- French language teaching historically centers on a Paris-based norm tied to clarity, prestige, and legitimacy.
- Institutionalization occurred mainly through the 19th-century Republican school system.
- The 'neutral' or 'universal' French is an ideological construct that clashes with today’s pluricentric reality.

2. Norm, Variation & Linguistic Power

- Norm = socially legitimated set of explicit/implicit rules disseminated via grammars, dictionaries, schools, media.
- Norms are sociopolitical: they prestige some forms while marginalizing others (Bourdieu; Milroy & Milroy).
- French exhibits diatopic, diastratic, diachronic and diaphasic variation; 'non-standard' forms have structure (Labov).

3. History of the Parisian Standard

- 1539: Villers-Cotterêts mandates French for legal acts—administrative shift, not a unified norm (Cerquiglini; Lodge).
- 17th c.: Grammars and the Académie française (1635) codify usage tied to Parisian elites; ideal of clarity (Rivarol).
- 19th c.: Ferry laws (1881–82) universalize schooling; standard spreads, regional varieties marginalized (Chervel; Weber).

4. Sociolinguistic Aspects of Francophone Diversity

- French is pluricentric: Quebec, Sub-Saharan Africa, Belgium, Switzerland, overseas territories, etc.
- Local varieties are legitimate and widely used but remain weakly recognized institutionally.
- Policies historically favored one centralized norm, producing insecurity and delegitimizing endogenous norms.

5. Pedagogical Challenges in a Pluricentric Francophonie

- Teaching must balance intelligibility with representativeness and equity across Francophone spaces.
- Standard French remains the global reference (diplomacy, media, certification), but variation matters for competence.
- Exclusive focus on France’s variety risks alienating learners and reproducing discrimination (glottophobia).

6. Diversity in Teaching across the Francophonie

- Textbooks from France often center the standard; newer materials abroad add variation but remain limited.
- Some regions (Quebec, West Africa, Switzerland) integrate more varieties; OIF supports localized materials.
- Innovations: comparative listening, contrastive analysis, intercultural tasks boosting motivation and awareness.

7. Inclusive Didactics: Principles, Strategies & Institutional Frames

- Principles: recognize all Francophone varieties; use authentic materials; develop intercultural & critical awareness.
- Strategies: curated corpora; contrastive tasks; inter-school digital projects; contextualized assessment.
- Institutional support: curricular reform, locally adapted textbooks, assessment criteria, teacher education.

Conclusion

- Goal is not to reject the norm but to reposition it within a wider linguistic ecosystem.
- Inclusive didactics legitimates diversity while safeguarding intelligibility and social justice.
- Requires political will, curriculum reform, and renewed teacher training.

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- Thank you for your attention.